

The Christensen Method:

Student Progress with the Cumulative Sentence

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In a previous paper this writer reviewed and briefly explained the Christensen Method (Nagasaki University Faculty of Education Bulletin, No. 32, March 1982). The conclusion reached in that paper suggested that it would behoove students to become familiar with the Christensen Method, as it would lead them to a better understanding of a literary style that is becoming more widespread as time goes by, to a better comprehension of the English they encounter in all areas of writing: novels, short stories, essays and even textbooks. The purpose of this paper, however, is to demonstrate that Japanese students of English, at the university level, at least, can be led not only to understand the style taught by the Christensen Method, but also to write their own cumulative sentences, and to compare their efforts with those of native speakers of English (hereinafter NSE), at the university level. After all, the Christensen Method was designed for NSE at the undergraduate and graduate university levels. In order to accomplish this, the writer will attempt to show how his Japanese university students progressed using the Christensen Method, beginning with a controlled use of one type of free modifying phrase (hereinafter FMP) at a time to a free use of all types. As this is done, the problems the students encountered along the way will be discussed where necessary, giving examples of the FMP's they wrote, both problem wrought and problem free. Finally, some of their better compositions will be given and an attempt at a conclusion will be made. In order to write this paper and make this attempt to reach a conclusion, a review of nearly one thousand sentences written by the students had to be made. This is in addition to the 2600 sentences surveyed for the original paper and those in the textbook. So, the problem then was not what to include, but what of the total mass of data to exclude.

Verbal Phrases

The first form of the FMP practiced was the Verbal Phrase (hereinafter VP). The reason being that this particular form of the FMP can be built from actual observations of actions. The VP usually begins with a verbal headword, a gerund in one form or another. While some might object that it acts as a modifier for a noun headword in a previous level, "the gerund in a VP acts more like a predicate—a sort of secondary predicate."¹ Consider the example by Walter Van Tilburg Clark:

1. The Christensen Method, p. 66.

Ex. 1

- 1 He [the hawk] could *sail* hours,
- 2 *searching* the blanched grasses below him with his telescopic eye,
- 2 *gaining* height against the wind,
- 2 *descending* in mile-long, gently declining swoops when he curved and rode back,
- 2 never *beating* a wing.

"The sentence reads smoothly; each second-level phrase is a sentence modifier telling how or in what manner the hawk *could sail for hours*."²

Before proceeding any further, the difference between coordinate and subordinate structure needs briefly to be explained lest the numbers preceding the phrases cause any confusion. The above example is of a coordinate structure as each of the modifying phrases modifies the base clause. Examples 14, 21, 46, 52 and 56 are all subordinate as there is more than two levels of generality in each (see Fac. of Ed. Bull. No. 32). In other words, the third level phrases modify, not the base clauses, but, rather, the second level phrases immediately preceding them.

One of the first exercises was done by asking a student to leave his or her seat and go outside the classroom, to re—enter and finally, to return to his or her seat. The rest of the class were asked to use VP's to construct a cumulative sentence, one main clause followed by VP's each reflecting individual, discernible actions made by the subject student. The class wrote from the very terse to longer sentences.

Ex. 2 (Short)

- 1 Miss "A" got up,
- 2 leaving the room,
- 2 coming back into the room
- 2 and sitting down again.

Ex. 3 (Longer)

- 1 Miss "A" pushed back her chair to leave the room,
- 2 standing up,
- 2 walking to the door,
- 2 opening it,
- 2 turning,
- 2 going outside,
- 2 closing the door,
- 2 coming back in,
- 2 going to her chair, and,
- 2 sitting back down again.

2. Ibid, p. 66.

The student who wrote Example 2 did not really understand the assignment. Though the student who wrote Example 3 did understand what to do and wrote more than any of the other students, the sentence does not evidence accurate and complete observation, both as important to the assignment as form. Since neither of the above was as accurate as might be, this writer offered his own observations in the desired format:

Ex. 4

- 2 When asked to leave the room,
- 1 Miss "A" was bewildered,
- 2 glancing to her left briefly,
- 2 looking at the teacher again,
- 2 turning to Miss "B" as if to ask what to do,
- 2 scraping her chair back,
- 2 rising in hesitation,
- 2 stepping to the right,
- 2 using both hands to push aside a vacant chair,
- 2 side-stepping a few paces away from the chairs,
- 2 turning to the right,
- 2 stumbling to the stuffed arm chair in the corner of the room,
- 2 shuffling, // to the door,
- 3 /almost slipping,
- 2 pausing,
- 2 taking the door knob in her left hand,
- 2 pulling the door open,
- 2 leaning into the hall,
- 2 turning around,
- 2 backing out of the room,
- 2 waiting thirty seconds before re-opening the door,
- 2 asking, // "May I come in?"
- 3 /with a smile,
- 2 approaching her seat with the same somewhat hesitant shuffle she used to leave it,
- 2 adroitly twisting and turning between Miss "C" and the stuffed chair,
- 2 sitting,
- 2 turning her head to her neighbor in confusion,
- 2 finally, laughing silently at her predicament.

Once having seen, read and understood the above, the students were then asked to observe some actions outside the classroom, write one sentence including as many of the various elements of the actions as they could; then type, copy and bring them to class. The nature of this exercise made it fairly easy for the students to write

cumulative sentences with some degree of aptitude as the following examples show:

Ex. 5

- 1 She tried to jump into the water from the lowest ledge of the swimming pool,
- 2 looking down into the water,
- 2 bending forward over the water a little,
- * 2 swinging her arms fro and back,
- 2 breathing deeply,
- 2 hesitating a little,
- 2 suddenly squatting down,
- 2 looking at the water again regretfully,
- 2 and, drawing a sigh. (KO)

Ex. 6

- 1 He came home from school,
- 2 opening the door cheerfully,
- 2 stumbling into his slippers,
- 2 dashing up the stairs,
- * 2 turning on the switch of his favorite program,
- 2 without taking his satchel off. (RA)

Except for one second level VP in each of the above examples, these are fairly well constructed cumulative sentences. In the case of Example 5, it is a matter of preference, the preferred words being, "back and forth." With Example 6, it is a bit more serious as there is both a missing article and a wrong headword at the beginning of the Prepositional Phrase, "on his favorite program." In fact, it would have been better, stylistically speaking, to have written two separate phrases, i. e., "turning on the [switch of the] TV," and "tuning to his favorite program." The words "switch of the" are optional and could have been left out. Still, these sentences are not too badly written. Not every student was as successful, however. Not even when assigned to write short sentences of one or two VP's.

Ex. 7

- 1 Some loaves of bread are being baked.
- 2 swelling softly,
- 2 savoring good.

Ex. 8

- 1 An insect came flying into the room through the open window,
- 2 flying around the fluorescent lamp,
- 3 buzzing.

Ex. 9

- 1 The white cat was surrounded by the many little cats,
- 2 licking softly the fur of each cat,

2 suckling the babies in turn.

Example 7 has the most common problem, that of usage. Bread does not savor good, or any other way, for that matter. The person seeing, smelling or tasting it is the one who savors it. A noun phrase using "savoring" as an adjective would have been better, e. g., "a savoring good aroma." The student, however, was struggling with an assignment of writing only VP's. Example 8 indicates the problem of unnecessary repetition. While not wrong grammatically speaking, the final verbal would have been better placed in the position of the second "flying," the headword of the second level VP. The reason being that the second "flying" does in no way indicate a different element or nature of flying, though the VP does make location more specific (a task better left for a prepositional phrase). The third level VP does add something new to the action of an insect flying, so if used as the headword of the second level VP, the sentence suddenly becomes more concise and stylistically better. Example 9 has a more serious problem. In the base clause the agents are the little cats (kittens) and the receiver of their action (being surrounded) was the white cat. However, in the two second level VP's, the actions are those of the white cat, which, as just stated, does no action in the base clause. There is, then, no action by the white cat in the next higher level (in this case the base clause) to be modified. And since the function of a VP is to modify an action in the level immediately above it, this attempt clearly is confused. There were, naturally, more difficulties on the part of the students, but after just three weeks practicing the VP they became more confident and began to produce VP's with more skill.

Examples of Coordinate VP's

Ex. 10

- 1 Soap bubbles were floating in the air,
- 2 reflecting the spectacle around them,
- 2 warped by a gentle breeze. (HH)

Ex. 11

- 1 A child was climbing a pole,
- 2 holding it with his hands and feet,
- 2 looking up intently at the top of it. (SO)

Ex. 12

- 1 A Noh mask hangs on the wall of my room,
- 2 staring at the opposite corner,
- 2 smiling mysteriously. (CU)

Ex. 13

- * 1 She struggled against the problem that I asked her,
- 2 scratching her head,
- 2 crossing her legs,
- * 2 inclining her neck,

- 1 and, finally she sighed,
- 2 saying, "I don't know." (RA)

An Example of a Subordinate VP

Ex.14

- 1 The man was waiting for someone,
- 2 lighting a cigarette,
- 3 soon trampling it under foot. (MT)

Example of Mixed (Coordinate and Subordinate) VP's

Ex. 15

- 1 My electric fan was in motion,
- 2 shaking its head slowly,
- 2 sometimes giving a small cry,
- 3 as if it were unwilling to work for me. (CU)

Ex. 16

- 1 A drop was on the deep green leaf,
- 2 rocking in the cradle of the leaf,
- 2 slipping down to the edge of it,
- 3 without any sound,
- 2 leaving it with a gentle breeze. (HH)

Ex. 17

- 1 The radio was broadcasting a program of aerobics,
- 2 explaining the action in a mixture of Japanese and English,
- 2 counting the numbers to the music in strange English,
- 3 "One, chu, suri..." (KO)

Though Example 13 has two usage problems (She struggled *with* the *question*... and "inclining her *head*," would have been better), considering the amount of time that the students had been practicing this pattern, the results are, by and large, satisfactory.

Noun Phrases

The next type of FMP taken up in class was the noun phrase (hereinafter NP). A very good definition of the NP is given in the text. "...the noun phrase can be of any length and can contain any number or type of modifying elements that English grammar allows. It is still a noun phrase if the headword is a noun."³ The following example written by Kay Boyle gives a clear idea of how NP's add to a word picture:

Ex. 18

- 1 The lighter's flame lighted up his *features* for an instant,

3. The Christensen Method, p. 32.

- 2 the packed rosy *jowl*,
- 2 the graying *temple* under Tyrolean hat's brim,
- 2 the bulging, blue, glazed *eyes*.

Each NP reveals one of the man's features and modifies it, the cumulative effect being a very clear image of the subject. After writing similar sentences by following the exercises in the textbook, the students were asked to write some of their own cumulative sentences using NP's. Some of the students anticipated the text or had unconsciously internalized the more common form of the NP. Though asked to place the modifiers in front of the noun headwords, a few apparently found this stipulation restrictive and leapfrogged the material in the text.

Ex.19

- 1 A butterfly flew away from the hydrangea,
- 2 light-blue wings which were pretending to be petals.

Ex. 20

- 2 In the glaring sunlight,
- 1 I'm watching the waves coming toward me,
- 2 my face on the wet sand,
- 2 the big waves,
- 3 fringed with white froth,
- 2 the small waves,
- 3 without any sounds.

Example 19 has a bound relative clause attached to the NP 'light-blue wings.' When the student was asked why it had been written in this way, the reply was that the NP sounded incomplete by itself. And indeed it would have. Example 20 has a similar situation in the second second level phrase. More serious was the writer's attempt to construct NP's by splitting absolutes which are what the third second level and first third level along with the fourth second level and second third level phrases happen to be. Since the chapter on NP's concludes by stating that most NP's have modifiers after the headword, the above examples seem less mistaken than they are. Of the sentences written according to the assignment, to keep the modifiers in front of the noun headwords, some of the better examples are given below.

Ex. 21

- 1 She opened the door when I knocked,
- 2 thrusting her head forward,
- 3 dishelved hair,
- 3 half opened eyes,
- 3 swollen cheeks. (SO)

Ex.22

- 1 I like early autumn best of all seasons,
- 2 bright clear air,

* 2 sweet, sour flavor of apples. (RA)

Ex. 23

1 A cat mewed outside in the dark,
2 a carefree and mysterious little cry. (CU)

Ex. 24

2 Mirages on asphalt streets,
2 dusty street trees,
2 sweat on passengers' foreheads,
2 sleeveless coats and short pants,
1 summer hasn't passed yet. (CU)

Ex. 25

1 The letter was just like him,
2 a square hand,
2 stiff expressions,
2 formal subjects,
* 2 yet, sincerity behind them. (CU)

Ex. 26

1 I painted a picture about six months ago,
* 2 a large pitcher full of various flowers,
2 an antique doll,
2 a bottle of wine,
2 a huge knife,
2 three apples, a lemon, and a strawberry,
2 an old-fashioned lamp,
2 a folk-art glass. (CU)

Prepositional Phrase

As Examples 22, 25 and 26 would seem to show, the students had difficulty avoiding modifiers after the headwords. And, as already pointed out, the text states that most NP's do have modifiers after the headword. So this leads to the two types of structures used to modify headwords postpositionally: The Relative Clause and the Prepositional Phrase. Though the text does contain a chapter on the Relative Clause, this was not studied because, as the author of The Christensen Method so clearly points out, the Relative Clause is actually rather infrequently used, certainly much less than is supposed. Moreover, Japanese university students have been exposed to the study of the Relative Clause for six years prior to matriculation, so little explanation was needed.

This leaves the Prepositional Phrase (PP) which had already been used by the students as bound phrases to modify noun headwords in NP's. The PP thus used provides both narrative and descriptive detail as well as making comparisons and

establishing time and place relationships. Below are a few examples of PP's used as bound phrases.

Ex. 27

- 1 Suddenly the alarm clock rang annoyingly just beside my pillow,
- 2 a small golden clock *with a tiny bell on it*. (RA)

Ex. 28

- 1 The leaves of the lily of the valley were trembling in the wind,
- 2 a soft, kind breeze *of spring*. (RA)

Ex. 29

- 1 I like summer sounds,
- 2 the droning *of cicada*,
- 2 the roar *of waves that beat upon the seashore*,
- 2 the sound *of crackling ice in a glass*,
- * 2 of fireworks that color the sky at night,
- * 2 and of the windbells that make me forget the heat of summer for a while. (HH)

Ex. 30

- 1 When I looked up an evening glow parted the sky in two,
- 2 a blazing scarlet belt that was missing the sun,
- 2 a grey belt that was calling the darkness of the night. (HH)

The above, of course, contain Relative Clauses bound to the NP's as well as PP's. But, at this point in the students' development there was no need to hold them to one form as was true in the beginning of the course.

The students also did quite well with the PP as a FMP. Here are four examples to illustrate.

Ex. 31

- 1 The woman went out of the house,
- 2 after midnight,
- 2 in spite of the heavy rain. (RA)

Ex. 32

- 1 Her casual words hit me on my head,
- 2 like the hardest punch of a boxer,
- 2 with great destructive force. (TH)

Ex. 33

- 1 I liked to go east by bus or train,
- 2 to the place where the sun is born,
- 2 to the place which is full of lights. (CU)

Ex. 34

- 1 A swallow flew to the south,
- 2 like a knife cutting the sky in two. (CU)

Absolute Phrase

The final tool introduced to the students was the Absolute Phrase or Absolute (Abs). The Abs is composed of a subject and nonfinite predicate, lacking the marker for tense, person and number, and qualifies, or adds details to, the base clause of the sentence.⁴ The following examples taken from the text will clarify.

Ex. 35

- 1 He smiled a little to himself as he ran...
- 2 his knees pumping high,
- 2 his hips twisting in the almost girlish run of a back in a broken field.

Ex. 36

- 1 She bought a pack of cigarettes from Luke and went out again,
- 2 a handkerchief around her head,
- 2 the pneumatic thing above the door hissing behind her.

All four FMP's in the two examples above are correctly known as nominative absolutes. Their chief advantage is that the author can present to the reader details that are a part of the whole action presented in the base clause.⁵ Since, in constructing an Abs, one need only to add a subject to a VP, this construction posed few problems for the students as the examples below exemplify.

Ex. 37

- 1 The blue sky was spreading gradually,
- 2 the dark cloud retreating,
- 2 the sun beginning to shine triumphantly. (KO)

Ex. 38

- 1 A mailman was coming up the slope,
- 2 a white helmet on his head,
- 2 a small black bag attached to his waist belt. (TK)

Ex. 39

- 1 Last Sunday I went to the shopping center,
- 2 the arcade full of people,
- 2 the shops full of goods that tempted me to buy. (RA)

Ex. 40

- 1 I was floating on my back in the pool,
- 2 my eyes dazzled by the sunlight,
- 2 my ears hearing the chatter of the water and the wind. (MT)

Ex. 41

- 1 The girl was riding on the rear seat of the motorcycle,

4. The Christensen Method, p. 78.

5. Ibid, p. 81.

- 2 her breast clinging (sic) to the back of the driver,
- 2 her long hair flowing behind. (AS)

Ex. 42

- 2 When we are invited to tea in Professor X's room,
- 1 I put a few drops of his brandy in my tea,
- 2 the fragrance tickling the tip of my nose,
- 2 the hot liquid burning my tongue a little. (CU)

Ex. 43

- 1 A pond is a canvas for nature,
- 2 circles and lines traced by the fish,
- 2 colorful patch works of the fallen leaves. (HH)

The Use of All Types of FMP's

It should be obvious by now that the students studying the Christensen Method were usually ready for the next step before the teacher was. So, when they were finally asked, in the last few weeks of the semester, to write cumulative sentences using all the forms of the FMP they had learned, in either coordinate or subordinate forms or both, plus the relative clause they already knew, they were quite ready to do so. Though the students were by no means writing their second language, English, perfectly, they were doing, by this time, better than had been expected. Much of the problems still exhibited at this stage were the same as those previously noted, problems largely stemming from usage, familiarity, or the lack of it, as well as those inherent in student haste, haste in meeting teacher imposed deadlines. Some of the problems, however, were those of metaphor usage. For example:

Ex. 44

- 1 It drizzled,
- 2 making faint sounds like a rising tide,
- 2 pine trees stretching their branches to the sky as if trying to catch raindrops,
- 2 willows swaying their long branches like a woman's hair after a bath.

Ex. 45

- 2 After the shower stopped,
- 1 I saw a rainbow in the sky,
- 2 a big, beautiful bridge of seven colors,
- 2 a fleeting vision of the prism.

Ex. 46

- 1 A black ball tumbled down the lane,
- 2 hitting the pins,
- 3 the white pins exploding in all directions,
- 4 like a wave striking rocks.

The first two examples above have what are actually minor problems. The first is a question of the woman's hair in the third second level Abs. Does the hair, as written, resemble willow branches? No, but it could, e. g. "a woman's long, stringy hair after a bath." Though the suggestion here is not one of perfection, the point is that the word "hair" by itself was not clear enough to use as a metaphor for willow branches. The question concerning the second example is whether or not one can actually see seven colors in a rainbow. It is often said there are seven colors of the rainbow, but in fact most agree that only three or four can be discerned by the naked eye. On the other hand, a prism separates the colors in a manner easily discernable by the unaided human eye. Though the first two metaphors have but minor problems, the third example is clearly a false metaphor, interesting, but indeed incorrect. In the base clause, the agent maintains its shape and the pins scatter, whereas, in the metaphor, the agent, the wave, shatters and the rocks maintain their shape. However, upon pointing out these problems the students understood and made fewer such mistakes thereafter. Below are some more examples. These are generally free of problems.

Ex. 47

- 1 My mother left the station,
- 2 a fat, little woman,
- 2 in a pink one-piece dress,
- 2 looking young for her age. (SO)

Ex. 48

- 1 Many red dragonflies are flying over a field,
- 2 keeping their wings almost flat,
- 2 flying higher and lower,
- 2 as if enjoying flying in the cool evening air. (TK)

Ex. 49

- 1 Red dragonflies flew over the garden,
- 2 first as if suspended in the comfortable wind,
- 2 and then flying straight into the red sky like jet planes. (MT)

Ex. 50

- 1 On the stage a girl was dancing,
- 2 moving slowly and softly,
- 2 her body like a kite in the sky,
- 2 leading the audience into a dream. (RA)

Ex. 51

- 1 A white one-piece dress was hung on a clothes pole,
- 2 swinging and flapping,
- 3 as if dancing to the wind. (CU)

Ex. 52

- 1 The wind was blowing through my room,
- 2 the cool flow,
- 3 swinging the curtain,
- 3 carrying the autumn air, (SO)

Ex. 53

- 1 A red rose was in its glory in the twilight garden,
- 2 breathing secretly,
- 2 like a lonely queen. (AS)

Conclusion

Quite frankly, it was only after the students were assigned the use of all types of FMP's to modify their base clauses, that this writer truly began to realize that his students were capable of displaying a degree of control over the cumulative sentence greater than he had any right to expect. Perhaps the last three examples, the favorites of this writer, will convince the reader of what is meant.

Ex. 54

- 1 She was paring a peach carefully,
- 2 the peal linking long. (SO)

Ex. 55

- 2 Even by a gentle breeze that I hardly noticed,
- 1 a windbell was swung,
- 2 giving a cool sound all around,
- 2 as if ripping off a layer of lazy air. (HH)

Ex. 56

- 1 The silver moon was high in the night sky,
- 2 like a clear mirror,
- 2 the light falling down silently,
- 3 dyeing the town pale. (AS)

With these last examples, the writer hopes the reader is left with the same feeling as the writer. That, though there were few sentences written by the students that were completely free of mistakes or errors, the sentences the students wrote were near enough grammatically perfect and, more important, quite creative enough to convince one that, given the opportunity, some Japanese students of English can indeed write as sophisticatedly and poetically as can most native users of English.

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